

**United States Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management**

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**Finding of No Significant Impact  
and  
San Antonio WSA and Ute Mountain Road Reclamation Project  
*Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-NM-F020-2010-0043-EA***

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## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

### **San Antonio WSA and Ute Mountain Road Reclamation Project *Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-NM-F020-2010-0043-EA***

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This unsigned Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and the attached EA (DOI-BLM-NM-F020-2010-0043-EA) for the San Antonio WSA and Ute Mountain Road Reclamation Project are available for public review and comment for 30 days beginning on August 25, 2010.

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts in the attached EA and consideration of the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, it is determined that with applicable mitigating measures, the Proposed Action would not result in significant impacts on the human environment. An environmental impact statement (EIS) is not required.

Despite this determination on the potential impacts, it is the intention as of the release of this finding that the Taos Field Office would only implement the actions presented in the attach EA proposed within the San Antonio WSA and that the actions proposed in the Ute Mountain area would be deferred until future transportation and access planning can be completed.

The decision to approve or deny all or portions of the Proposed Action and, if appropriate, a signed FONSI with rationale will be released after consideration of public comments and finalization of the EA.

# ATTACHMENT

## **San Antonio WSA and Ute Mountain Road Reclamation Project** ***DOI-BLM-NM-F020-2010-0043-EA***

### **Chapter 1: Purpose and Need**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The Taos Field Office proposes to implement closures of approximately 16.5 miles of roads in two priority areas—the San Antonio Wilderness Study Area (WSA) and Ute Mountain, in northeast Rio Arriba County and northern Taos County, New Mexico, respectively—as part of its travel management program under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) includes provisions to fund the development and improvement of domestic infrastructure such as public roads and facilities, as well as projects that benefit natural resources. ARRA funding was provided to the BLM to be distributed among its offices to implement “shovel ready” projects during the 2009 and 2010 fiscal years. The Taos Field Office was among those recipients to implement travel management on the Taos Plateau, an area encompassing approximately 255,000 acres of public lands.

The ARRA funding is used to manage and update the road and trail system on the Taos Plateau by taking the following actions:

- inventory routes not previously mapped,
- identify primary road maintenance needs,
- close roads identified for closure through travel management planning,
- sign entry points,
- number and mark the open primary and primitive roads and trails, and update BLM produced maps.

While the BLM is implementing most of these actions throughout the Taos Plateau area, road closures would only be implemented in the two areas identified as priorities by the Taos Field Office to protect their natural characteristics.

The roads identified for closure in the San Antonio WSA are those not existing at the time the WSA was established in 1980. Establishment of new vehicle trails is a violation of the Interim Management Policy for Lands under Wilderness Review (H-8550-1), such that vehicle trails created after the completion of the wilderness inventory are new surface disturbances that cause an impairment to wilderness characteristics and so require reclamation. Therefore, the decision to be made at this time regarding the roads in the San Antonio WSA is on the appropriate method to use for reclaiming the roads.

Management of the Ute Mountain area, which was acquired by the BLM in 2003 and 2005, has been guided by the 2005 Ute Mountain Interim Management Plan (IMP), a plan which was never analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, even though it was available for public review and comment and participation by interested parties was incorporated during the planning and drafting of the IMP. Therefore, a decision to close select roads in this area is necessary in addition to the appropriate method to use for their reclamation.

## **1.2 Purpose and Need for Action**

Within San Antonio WSA, the purpose of the project is to implement and enforce travel management decisions by the Taos Field Office in compliance with the BLM's Interim Management Policy for Lands under Wilderness Review and in a manner which meets the goals and objectives of the Taos RMP and subsequent, area-specific plans. In the Ute Mountain area, the purpose is to consider certain select roads for closure in order to protect the landscapes inventoried to have high-quality wilderness characteristics and to meet the goals and objectives of the Ute Mountain Interim Management Plan. The Taos Field Office needs to identify, implement, and enforce those closures which would alleviate the degradation of resources associated with the continued use of the roads.

## **1.3 Land Use Plan Conformance**

The proposed project is in conformance with the 1988 Taos Resource Management Plan, as amended, which designated the Taos Plateau area as *limited* to designated roads and trails (see map 2-3 in the Taos RMP). A *limited* area is "restricted at certain times, in certain areas, and/or to certain vehicular use" and may be accommodated by the designation of roads and trails (43 CFR 8340.0-5 (g)).

Subsequent, area-specific plans prepared to implement the Taos RMP include the 1992 San Antonio/Pot Mountain Habitat Management Plan, 1994 North Unit Transportation Plan, and the 2005 Ute Mountain Interim Management Plan (IMP). The latter plan was prepared as interim management for Ute Mountain since this area was not in federal ownership at the time the RMP was completed. As part of these plans, specific routes were designated for limited motorized travel—as dictated by the travel management classification for the areas—while others were closed in order to protect sensitive resources, reduce excessive densities of routes across important or sensitive landscapes, or to eliminate route redundancies.

The project is also consistent with the full range of alternatives considered in the Draft Taos Resources Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, released for a 90-day public review and comment period on June 11, 2010. The plan, when complete, will replace the 1988 RMP.

## **1.4 Identification of Issues**

Notice of the Taos Plateau travel management program under the provisions of ARRA was posted on the BLM New Mexico website in September 2010 to notify the public of the actions to be taken by the Taos Field Office. The actions identified above in section 1.1 remain available online at the following web address:

<http://recovery.doi.gov/press/bureaus/bureau-of-land-management/blm-fact-sheets/blm-new-mexico-fact-sheets/blm-new-mexico-implementation-of-the-taos-field-office-travel-management-plan/>.

On March 31, 2010, the proposed project was discussed by the Taos Field Office resource specialist's transportation project coordination meeting. The project was also discussed by an interdisciplinary team of specialists during an internal NEPA coordination meeting on April 13. Issues discussed included wildlife, consultation requirements on threatened and endangered species, and needs related to archeological clearance while preparing and performing road closures and reclamation.

Based on internal scoping efforts, the following issues are considered relevant to the analysis of this proposed management action:

#### **Cultural Resource**

- Potential to disturb cultural resources during reclamation activities

#### **Migratory Birds**

- Potential to disturb nesting birds in vegetation affected by reclamation activities

#### **San Antonio WSA**

- Impairment to naturalness, opportunity for solitude, and opportunities for primitive, unconfined recreation

#### **Non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics**

- Potential to affect the naturalness, opportunity for solitude, and opportunities for primitive, unconfined recreation in the Ute Mountain area

#### **Soils**

- Potential to disturb sensitive soils during reclamation activities

#### **Vegetation including Noxious Weeds**

- Potential to disturb native vegetation
- Potential for the spread of noxious weeds due project related soil disturbance

#### **Water Quality**

- Potential to affect surface water quality due to project related soil disturbance

#### **Wildlife**

- Reduction in habitat fragmentation
- Potential to disturb small mammal, reptile or amphibian habitat during project related activities.

#### **Opportunities for Motorized Access in the Ute Mountain Area**

- Extent to which access to public lands in the Ute Mountain area would be affected

Issues considered but dismissed from detailed analysis include the following:

- Federally listed threatened and endangered species lists were consulted and it was determined that there were no listed species that would occur or have potential habitat within the project area (See Appendix C for a list of species considered in this analysis).

## **Chapter 2: Description of Alternatives**

### **2.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action**

The proposed action is to reclaim closed roads in the San Antonio WSA that were not in existence at the time the WSA was established using methods described below. Appendix A (Map of San Antonio WSA) identifies roads proposed for closure within or entering the WSA. Approximately 2 roads, totaling 1.6 miles would be closed in the WSA. The maximum area potentially disturbed if reclamation activities were applied to the 1.6 miles would be approximately 2.32 acres, assuming a 16-foot width of disturbance. In the WSA, however, actual reclamation would be confined to the width of current road disturbance to the extent possible and applied to only a portion of its length—typically the first few hundred feet or until the road is out of view—such that surface disturbance associated with the reclamation activities would likely be much less than 2.32 acres.

The proposed action is also to close and reclaim certain select roads in the Ute Mountain area to protect the natural character of the area. Appendix B (Map of Ute Mountain) identifies which roads are proposed for closure in this area. In this area roads are selected for closure in order to protect sensitive resources, reduce densities of routes across important or sensitive landscapes, or to eliminate route redundancies. Approximately 22 roads, totaling 15 miles would be closed in this area. The maximum potential disturbance associated with reclamation activities in the Ute Mountain area if reclamation were applied to all road segments would be approximately 21.81 acres. However, since reclamation would only be applied to a portion of each road, actual disturbance would be substantially less, and much of this disturbance would not be caused by heavy equipment, but would be attributed to hand tools.

The reclamation would be applied to eliminate vehicle use on unauthorized vehicle trails by re-contouring the soil, providing for re-vegetation, adding local materials to obstruct access, and by attempting to make roads unapparent to visitors. Entry to areas historically used for the purpose of driving cattle would be fenced and gated as not to permit vehicle travel but allow livestock and wildlife to pass freely. Signing may be installed to indicate a road's status and provide visitor guidance. Violation of closures would be citable by law enforcement.

#### **Reclamation Methods:**

- Placement of obstructions. Rock collected by hand from the immediate area would be scattered on the vehicle trail to create a rough surface that would encumber vehicle travel and reduce visual contrasts created by the smoother driving surface. Large rocks may be moved with heavy equipment. Large dips or berms may be created using heavy equipment in order to obstruct passage for motorized vehicles. Temporary or permanent wire and T-post fence and locked gates may be constructed where needed to discourage vehicle use. Piñon or juniper trees from immediate area could be used for creating barriers where significant amounts of these tree species exist. Snags of any tree species would not be taken due to their high wildlife habitat qualities. Dead and down material would be used whenever possible. No ponderosa pine, aspen, Douglas-fir, white fir or any riparian obligate or semi-obligate species would be cut or used in reclamation activities. Whenever possible, no trees or shrubs would be removed during the migratory bird breeding season (April through August).
- Break soil compaction. Scarifying and pitting would be made with hand tools to loosen and provide texture to compacted surface to better capture water, organic debris and wind-blown seeds (provide safe sites for wind-blown seed germination). Motorized equipment (such as dozers, tractors, or hoes) may be used to rip vehicle trails to reduce soil compaction and make the surface more suitable for plant growth.

- Drainage. Erosion control features to stabilize head cuts or provide drainage would be constructed where accelerated soil movement on trail is apparent. Rock or erosion control material would be placed on head cuts. Water bars or dips would be constructed to prevent down trail movement of water due to drainage capture or sheet flow capture and concentration.
- Camouflaging. Rock and dead shrubs may be collected by hand from the immediate area and scattered on the vehicle trail to make it less recognizable as a vehicle path. Sagebrush and salt brush, grasses and whatever vegetation is around area may be partially buried into the vehicle trail to make them appear to be rooted. After a couple of years, the vegetation would eventually rehabilitate itself.
- Seeding. A native seed mix would be applied to revegetate reclaimed road segments.
- Relocating/Transplanting. Plants would be collected and salvaged within the area of road closure, moved and replanted in the closure area. (Transplanted vegetation would not be irrigated and would likely not survive. However, the objective of this method is to create the appearance that vegetation naturally occurs and to screen the location of the reclaimed route.)

The following standard measures would also be used:

- To minimize/avoid impacts to migratory birds, vegetative disturbing activities would be conducted during the non-primary portion of the nesting season (September through March). Where disturbance would occur during the migratory bird breeding season, the scale and length of time of disturbance should be minimized and an inspection and clearance of the area for migratory bird nesting would be conducted by a BLM Taos Field Office approved biologist using a survey protocol provided by a BLM Taos Field Office biologist. If any active nests are located within the proposed project area, projects activities would not be permitted until written approval by a BLM Taos Field Office biologist. The BLM Taos Field Office, or designee, would monitor any active nests located from a nest survey.
- Site-specific archaeological clearances would be completed prior to commencing work.
- Site-specific botanical and wildlife clearance would be completed prior to commencing work where activities would include digging for rocks, relocation/transplanting of vegetation, digging of berms or water bars, re-contour work, or other surface disturbing activities outside the existing surface disturbance of the vehicle trail. During the breeding season for raptor species, restoration activities would not occur within 1 mile of known nesting areas.
- The use of rock to obstruct vehicle passage would only be used where the obstruction can be tied into the existing topography. The source for large rock would be those lying on the surface and to the greatest extent possible from outside the WSA.
- To the greatest extent possible disturbance would be limited to within the route to be reclaimed. The use of motorized equipment would be limited to the existing or designated roads or ways as identified in respective planning documents
- Surface disturbances, including those that may be caused by the reclamation activity, would be naturalized using hand tools, to remove linear features and unnatural appearing slopes or alterations by reshaping the surface to blend with the existing topography
- Site specific erosion control methods will be employed on slopes greater than 5% to slow downslope water movement.
- Implementation activities will be avoided during the summer rain (June – August) and spring snowmelt (March through April) seasons to avoid runoff induced erosion.
- Work will be halted during precipitation events to avoid damage to soils.
- Work will not occur on days with winds exceeding 10 mph to avoid fugitive dust air quality impairment.

## **2.2 Alternative B: No Action**

Under the No Action Alternative, the BLM would not reclaim routes identified as closed in the priority areas identified in section 2.1. Limited signing and enforcement may be applied on previous route designations.

## **2.3 Alternative C: Importation of Material**

Under Alternative C, instead of using local natural resources (e.g. soil, vegetation, rocks/mineral materials) to implement components of the proposed action, such materials would be brought in from other sources outside of the local area. This would minimize impacts to the project area and wildlife habitat surrounding areas targeted for rehabilitation. All other components of Alternative C would be the same as the proposed action.

## **Chapter 3: Affected Environment**

This area is valued for its diverse wildlife habitats and the forage it provides for domestic livestock grazing. Other activities include hiking, camping, mountain biking, sightseeing, horseback riding, and hunting. Approximately 23 acres would be affected by the Proposed Action. The project areas are located in Rio Arriba and Taos counties.

### ***3.1 Cultural Resources***

It is apparent that the general areas of both the San Antonio WSA and Ute Mountain were used intensively by prehistoric peoples over a long period of time. These people were likely drawn to the area because of the many local resources including big game, vegetal resources, lithic material, and permanent water. Sites tend to be plentiful along the rims of the Rio Grande gorge and the San Antonio River canyon, and in the nearby mountain ranges. Most sites are located in wooded areas, although huge scatters of artifacts continue onto the rolling sage flats. Protohistoric people including Utes and Apaches are known to have visited the area since early historic times. Six archaeological sites have been recorded within the San Antonio WSA. They include artifact scatters dating from the Early Archaic Period (4800 BC) through the Historic Pueblo Period (AD 1600 onward). A single site, which includes petroglyphs and an artifact scatter, has been located within the Ute Mountain area.

### ***3.2 Migratory Birds***

Migratory bird species of conservation concern (BLM Interim Management Guidance 2008-050) that have the potential to occur within the project area include burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, prairie falcon, golden eagle, mountain plover, olive-sided flycatcher, Virginia's warbler, loggerhead shrike, mourning dove, pinyon jay, Brewer's sparrow, and sage sparrow.

The piñon-juniper community supports Gray flycatchers, Juniper titmice, Bewick's wrens, and Black-throated gray warbler. Gray flycatchers, Juniper titmice, and Bewick's wrens prefer woodlands with high overstory juniper cover. The Juniper titmouse is associated with senescent trees, and the Black-throated gray warbler with piñon pines. Ferruginous hawks and Swainson's hawks nest in scattered piñon-juniper trees. Pinyon jays are a piñon pine obligate that nest in loose colonies.

Sagebrush plants provide nest sites and cover from wind and predators, harbor insects for insect-eating wildlife, and are the main food for pronghorn in the winter. Bird species of concern that nest in sagebrush



shrubs include the sage thrasher, Brewer's sparrow, sage sparrow, green-tailed towhee, loggerhead shrike, gray flycatcher, and occasionally Swainson's hawk.

### 3.3 San Antonio WSA

San Antonio WSA is 7,050 acres composed of broad, gently rolling sage-brush and grass plains bisected north to south by the 200' Rio San Antonio gorge. It contains the values of naturalness, size, and opportunities for solitude, and unconfined recreation necessary for wilderness study. Public use here consists primarily of hunting and grazing.

### 3.4 Non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics

Approximately 13,190 acres of Ute Mountain and the adjacent area have been inventoried to have wilderness characteristics. Ute Mountain is a lava dome rising to 10,093 feet above the sage and grass plateau. A fingered edge appears from piñon-juniper growing in canyons part way up from the base and becoming denser with stands of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, aspen and mixed conifer at the peak. Although it is not a designated Wilderness or a Wilderness Study Area, it was found to have values of naturalness, and possess opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation in 2006. The area is used for hunting, wildlife viewing, and hiking.

### 3.5 Geology and Soils

**3.5.1 Geology.** The general geology of the action areas is characterized by volcanic activity. Ute and San Antonio Mountains are characterized by igneous rock including intermediate to silicic volcanic rocks (Pliocene era for volcanoes in Taos Plateau) comprising the bulk of each mountain and basaltic to andesitic lava flows (Pliocene) occurring on the southwest slope of Ute and most of the plateau surrounding San Antonio. The plateau surrounding Ute Mountain is comprised of alluvium material (Holocene to upper Pleistocene).

**3.5.2 Soils.** The soils occurring in the project area and their relevant properties as indicated by the soil survey are identified in Table 1, along with estimated mileage of road closure in each soil type under the proposed action. Erosion and rutting hazards indicate the limitations of these soils for use as roads. While erosion hazard on road and trail exceeds moderate for only one soil type, rutting hazard is severe for all but 3 soils identified. This is important as rutting leads to increased road width as vehicles attempt to avoid ruts by driving to one side. Fugitive dust resistance is relatively good for all soils, indicating the need for only minor BMPs during road rehabilitation activities.

Soil Map Unit Name	Miles	Erosion Hazard		Rutting Hazard	Fugitive Dust Resistance
		On Road and Trail			
Fernando cobbly loam, 1 to 7 percent slopes	4.3	Moderate		Severe	Moderately Resistant
Fernando-Hernandez association, nearly level	0.3	Slight/Moderate		Severe	Moderately Resistant
Fluvents, nearly level	0.1	Slight		Slight	Moderately Resistant
Fernando clay loam, 1 to 3 percent slopes	2	Slight		Severe	Moderately Resistant
Hernandez-Kim association,	2.6	Slight/Moderate		Severe	Moderately Resistant

gently sloping

Hernandez-Petaca association,

gently sloping	1.8	Moderate	Severe	Moderately Resistant
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Manzano clay loam, 0 to 1

percent slopes	1.5	Slight	Severe	Resistant
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Rock outcrop-Raton complex,

moderately steep	0.6	N/A	Slight	Resistant
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Sedillo-Silva association,

strongly sloping	1.2	Moderate/Severe	Slight	Moderately Resistant
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Tenorio loam, 0 to 3 percent

slopes	1	Slight	Severe	Moderately Resistant
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Luhon-Travelers complex, 3 to

7 percent slopes	1.5	Moderate	Severe	Moderately Resistant
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Stunner cobbly loam, 1 to 5

percent slopes	0.1	Slight	Severe	Moderately Resistant
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### **3.6 Vegetation including Noxious Weeds**

#### **3.6.1 Vegetation**

Elevations range from approximately 7500 to 8500 feet above mean sea level. Annual precipitation is approximately 16 inches with the majority of accumulation in late summer. Sagebrush steppe and piñon-juniper woodland communities dominate the area. The dominant understory species consist of blue grama, western wheatgrass, needle and thread, and Indian rice grass. A few scattered aspen stands also occur in higher elevations.

Most of the plant communities are undergoing a stage of species expansion in which big sagebrush is present, but shrubs, including big sagebrush, and high density forests continue to dominate the vegetation that influences the ecological processes in the area. Through much of the project area the sagebrush is fairly dispersed and generally occurs in dense stands making up a majority of the vegetation in this area.

#### **3.6.2 Noxious Weeds**

Noxious weeds found in the area of the proposed action include New Mexico Noxious Weed Class A species black henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), Class B species, Musk thistle (*Carduus nutans*) and Class C species, cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). Other common weeds found along roadways in the project area are Kochia (*Kochia scoparia*) and Russian thistle (*Salsola iberica*).

### **3.7 Water Quality**

The proposed action occurs adjacent to three different watersheds. Slopes and land surrounding Ute Mountain drain to the Rio Costilla along the north flank of the mountain and to the Rio Grande along all other faces. As the Rio Costilla is ephemeral and empties into the Rio Grande within a short distance from Ute Mountain slopes, the entire area may be considered linked to the Rio Grande. The project area around San Antonio Mountain drains into the Rio San Antonio, a river that bisects the San Antonio WSA. The Rio San Antonio from San Antonio Mountain to the NM-CO border is known to be seasonally and spatially intermittent. Designations and attainment categories for the project area are as follows (NMED, 2010)

Rio Grande, Red River to CO Border (NM-2119-05): has a listing of 5/5C for not supporting coldwater aquatic life. A 5/5C listing indicates that there is not enough data to determine the pollutant of concern or there is not adequate data to develop a TMDL.

Rio San Antonio, CO Border to Montoya Canyon (NM-2120.A-902): fully supports all designated uses.

### ***3.8 Wildlife***

Wildlife is abundant and diverse throughout the project area, located in the Taos Plateau or North Unit area. It is valued for its big game winter range and high density of nesting raptors along the Rio Grande Gorge. A wide range of large and small mammals can be found, including the big game species Rocky Mountain elk, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, mule deer, black bear, and mountain lion, as well as various bat species, skunk, fox, coyote, bobcat, chipmunks, pocket gophers, Gunnison's prairie dogs, various mice and rat species, porcupine, cottontail, and jackrabbit. Avian species are varied and include, among others, turkey vulture, piñon jay, Western meadowlark, mourning dove, mountain plover, Western burrowing owl, black-billed magpie, and mountain chickadee. Various reptiles, amphibians, and insects can also be found in this habitat.

The area is located in the Intermountain Basins Big Sagebrush Shrub land and Rocky Mountain Montane Mixed Conifer Forest and Woodland, key wildlife habitat types as identified in the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (2005). Existing habitat includes piñon-juniper woodlands, open prairie, arroyo/wash areas and small patches of coniferous forest.

The area contains critical winter range and a migratory corridor for elk, mule deer and pronghorn. Winter range is considered the most limiting habitat type for elk and mule deer, and includes sagebrush-steppe, piñon-juniper woodlands, mountain shrub, and ponderosa pine below 7,500 feet. In northern New Mexico, mule deer become concentrated on winter ranges with densities of 20-100 deer/square mile in suitable habitat (Watkins and Bishop et al. 2007). Winter ranges are critical because these areas support higher densities of mule deer and elk on less available forage, are less tolerant of high herbivory rates, are prone to non-native weed invasion, and are potential areas for development of energy, minerals or residential subdivisions.

### ***3.9 Opportunities for Motorized Access in the Ute Mountain Area***

A survey of existing routes, including trails, was conducted by the BLM in 2005 in preparation for the Ute Mountain IMP. This area was reinventoried in 2009 and 2010 as part of the BLM's implementation of the Taos Plateau ARRA project. A total of 31 miles of roads are identified in this area.

## **Chapter 4: Environmental Effects**

### **4.1 Direct and Indirect Effects**

#### **4.1.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action**

##### ***4.1.1.1 Cultural Resources***

Archaeological inventory would be performed prior to all earth disturbing activities associated with this project. If sites are located they would be avoided by all earth disturbing activities or mitigated. Closing

and reclaiming of roads would likely have a positive effect on cultural resources by limiting vehicular transportation in the areas.

#### **4.1.1.2 *Migratory Birds***

By limiting access by motor vehicles to important wildlife habitat, there could be an increase in vegetative diversity and control of nonnative invasive vegetation that may positively affect local macroinvertebrate populations, resulting in an increase in the avian prey base, indirectly benefiting migratory birds in and adjacent to the project areas.

The proposed restoration actions could minimize disturbance and decrease fragmentation to the following habitats which support local wildlife populations: grasslands, shrublands, piñon-juniper forests, ponderosa pine forests, and mixed conifer forests. The protection of these habitats could help to bring the areas back to historic conditions, which are described in section 3.3.1, and could provide long-term benefits to the native wildlife populations that are dependent upon them.

Potential impacts to individual birds are possible due to the equipment used during rehabilitation treatments, including noise and human disturbance to destruction of eggs, nests, or nesting habitat. If project activities occur between the months of September through March, there would be no potential for direct adverse impacts to individual migratory birds. Because the site-specific project areas would be small, and there is abundant habitat of a similar type in the region, there would be negligible impacts to migratory bird populations as a whole.

Therefore, the proposed action has the potential to have a negative effect upon individual birds, eggs, young, and/or the nesting habitat of nesting birds; however, it is unlikely there would be a notable impact to the populations of species of conservation concern.

#### **4.1.1.3 *San Antonio WSA***

The Proposed action would be consistent with the WSA Interim Management Policy. The Proposed Action would not impair the suitability of San Antonio Wilderness Study Area for preservation as wilderness. In certain cases in the process of reclaiming vehicle trails, new disturbance may be created as permitted under the IMP when reclaiming a violation (Chapter I.B.2.b.(2)). However, surface disturbance would be limited under the conditions in the Proposed Action. Reclamation efforts would be designed to camouflage unauthorized vehicle trails causing them to be substantially unnoticeable to the average viewer.

#### **4.1.1.4 *Non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics***

The Proposed Action would benefit wilderness characteristics such as naturalness and solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation at Ute Mountain. Rehabilitation of vegetation in 16 miles of routes would decrease the amount of development in the area and increase the level of naturalness. Likewise, decreasing the area affected by access would increase remoteness from the sights and sounds of human activity, thereby improving solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation.

#### **4.1.1.5 *Geology and Soils***

#### **4.1.1.5.1 *Geology***

There would be no change to the geology under the proposed action. Geologic features would be maintained and protected by protection of soil resources covering them.

#### **4.1.1.5.2 *Soils***

Under the proposed action, soils would be protected from loss due to erosion. There would be potential short term impact to soils from mechanical manipulation, but removing vehicle impacts and re-vegetating soil areas would result in soils functioning without impact, allowing maximum infiltration of surface runoff and minimizing erosion.

#### **4.1.1.6 *Vegetation including Noxious Weeds***

The Proposed Action would remove or disturb roughly 4 acres of vegetation in the location of roads to be rehabilitated. This action would also cause disturbance to the surrounding vegetation in navigating to the sites and collecting material adjacent to the sites that would be rehabilitated. A short-term loss of vegetative cover could result from collecting vegetation adjacent to rehabilitation sites within that area.

Any time soil disturbance occurs the possibility of noxious weed invasion also occurs, as resources are freed. The proposed action would not pose additional risks of introduction or spread of noxious weeds beyond those already occurring. Under the proposed action, weeds could be introduced by road maintenance equipment or recreational activities. The primary long term indirect effect of the proposed action would be maintenance of the existing native-steppe, native grasses, herbaceous recover, and wildlife habitat communities. Since the area consists of grassland and woodland communities which are being impacted by the extensive road network, increases in perennial grass and shrub cover could be expected.

Disturbed sites containing noxious weeds may experience a short term increase in these species following treatment. This indirect effect could result from the increased light and water made available from eliminating the competing sagebrush. The proposed project areas with intact grassland communities and warmer, moister climate should not experience the weed flush. BLM staff observations on similar treatments in the areas nearby found no detectable increases in knapweed establishment outside previously disturbed sites.

Because the proposed action restricts full sized vehicles to existing roads and trails, the likelihood of increased noxious weed establishment is expected to be low and would not increase the risk of noxious weed establishment over other current human activities taking place in the area.

#### **4.1.1.7 *Water Quality***

Under the proposed action, water quality should improve slightly as a result of reduced soil erosions and overland sheet flow. Some sedimentation may occur during implementation while soils are disturbed. These short term impairments will be negligible and long term improvement of infiltration and reduction of soil erosion will result from the project as a whole.

#### **4.1.1.8 *Wildlife***

The proposed action would remove approximately 4 acres of wildlife habitat by removal of soil/vegetation/mineral material to use to rehabilitate roads. While the removal of vegetation would

decrease the production of grasses and forbs for forage opportunities for deer, elk, pronghorn and small mammals, remove nesting habitat for birds, and result in the loss of habitat for insect populations which many bird species require for food, the removal would provide for 24.13 previously disturbed acres of wildlife habitat by eliminating or reducing road density in the area, creating larger unbroken blocks of grasslands, woodlands or shrublands and could also provide more forage and cover opportunities in proximity to one another. The reduction of roads serves to decrease fragmentation of existing habitat, improving habitat quality for large mammals that require large core areas for hiding, resting and foraging.

The short-term effects of the proposed management action on wildlife populations include disturbance from machinery and occasional motor vehicle use during rehabilitation activities. Due to the small amount of habitat loss from collection of local materials (approximately 4 acres), and the large amount of similar habitat in the region, there would be minimal adverse impacts to wildlife from the proposed action.

#### ***4.1.1.9 Opportunities for Motorized Access in the Ute Mountain Area***

Under this alternative there would be a 50% reduction in the number of routes at Ute Mountain. Thirty-one miles of primitive roads would decrease to 15 miles. This may limit game retrieval and access up Ute Mountain from the base. However, there would still be motorized access around the base of the mountain from the north, west, and south and to parking near Costilla Creek.

### **4.1.2 Alternative B: No Action**

#### ***4.1.2.1 Cultural Resources***

There will be no disturbance to archaeological sites due to project implementation activities.

#### ***4.1.2.2 Migratory Birds***

Under the no action alternative, there may be disturbance to some migratory birds in limited areas in the spring, depending on off-road vehicle activities that occur throughout the project area; however, there would be no disturbance by people and machinery due to rehabilitation activities.

#### ***4.1.2.3 San Antonio WSA***

This alternative would not protect wilderness values such as naturalness, solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. These wilderness values would continue to be impacted. Effective action of reclaiming or camouflaging routes that occurred after the 1980 Wilderness Inventory would not occur.

#### ***4.1.2.4 Non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics***

Under the No Action alternative impacts to naturalness, solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation would continue. An opportunity to enhance wilderness character would be missed.

#### ***4.1.2.5 Geology and Soils***

#### **4.1.2.5.1 *Geology.***

Under the no action alternative, geologic features may be subject to damage from exposure due to surface soil loss.

#### **4.1.2.5.2 *Soils.***

Under the no action alternative, soils would be subject to increasing loss and damage due to vehicle compaction and widening of roads. Compaction of road surfaces reduce water infiltration, increasing runoff from the road and creating gullies in and adjacent to the road. Widening of roads, as a result of rutting, increases these effects by increasing compaction and bare soil surface area.

#### **4.1.2.6 *Vegetation including Noxious Weeds***

No direct effects to vegetation would result by closing or rehabilitating roads. Over the long-term, continued expansion of the road network could result in the eventual loss of the native-steppe, herbaceous recovery, and grassland communities and could result in conversion of certain areas into invasive species dominated sites due to increased traffic and importation and spread of noxious weed seeds throughout the region. Over the long-term, increased loss of understory species could result in accelerated soil erosion and possible increase in invasive species.

#### **4.1.2.7 *Water Quality***

Under the no action alternative, there is a slight chance that road surfaces identified for closure in the proposed action will contribute to the water quality impairment identified for the Rio Grande and may result in one or more impairments for the Rio San Antonio. A slight chance means that impairments caused by the no action will be very near or below the detection limit for water quality parameters measured.

#### **4.1.2.8 *Wildlife***

Under the no action alternative, there may be competition between elk or deer and livestock in limited areas due to habitat fragmentation caused by an extensive road network and human disturbance, depending on climatic conditions.

#### **4.1.2.9 *Opportunities for Motorized Access in the Ute Mountain Area***

There would be no affect to motorized access under the no action alternative.

### **4.1.3 Alternative C: Importation of Material**

#### **4.1.3.1 *Cultural Resources***

Impacts to cultural resources under Alternative C would be the same as those described in section 4.1.1.1.

#### ***4.1.3.2 Migratory Birds***

Under Alternative C, there could be some disturbance to migratory birds in limited areas in the spring, depending on activities that occur throughout the project area, however, there would be no disturbance by people and machinery due to removal of adjacent shrubs, vegetation or soil for rehabilitation activities.

#### ***4.1.3.3 San Antonio WSA***

Impacts to wilderness values within the San Antonio WSA under Alternative C would be the same as those described in section 4.1.1.3.

#### ***4.1.3.4 Non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics***

Impacts to wilderness characteristics in the Ute Mountain area under Alternative C would be essentially the same as those described in section 4.1.1.4.

#### ***4.1.3.5 Geology and Soils***

Impacts to geology and soils under Alternative C would be the same as those described in section 4.1.1.5.

#### ***4.1.3.6 Vegetation including Noxious Weeds***

No direct effects to vegetation would result by closing or rehabilitating roads. Over the long-term, a decrease in the expansion of the road network could result in the improvement of the native-steppe, herbaceous recovery, and grassland communities and could result in a decrease in invasive species dominated sites due to less traffic and importation and spread of noxious weed seeds throughout the region.

#### ***4.1.3.7 Water Quality***

Impacts to water quality under Alternative C would be the same as those described in section 4.1.1.7.

#### ***4.1.3.8 Wildlife***

Under Alternative C, there would be benefits to wildlife and habitat, similar to Alternative A, however, there would be no loss of habitat from collection of vegetation, soil, or rocks from adjacent areas.

#### ***4.1.2.9 Opportunities for Motorized Access in the Ute Mountain Area***

Impacts to opportunities for motorized access under Alternative C would be the same as those described in section 4.1.1.9.

### **4.2 Cumulative Effects Analysis**

A cumulative impact, as defined in 40 CFR 1508.7, is the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other action.



## **4.2.1 Cumulative Actions**

### **4.2.1.1 Past and Present Actions**

An extensive, existing network of roads traverses the Taos Plateau. The 1994 North Unit Transportation Plan recognized approximately 470 miles of existing roads at the time it was prepared, of which approximately 162 miles was identified for closure, including the routes proposed for reclamation within San Antonio WSA. Since this plan essentially went unimplemented, the current network of established roads has likely grown.

As indicated in section 1.1, a crew funded by ARRA is currently at work on the Taos Plateau inventorying routes not previously mapped, signing entry points, numbering and marking open roads and trails, and undertaking other travel management actions.

The Ute Mountain Interim Management Plan was prepared in 2005 to address the recently acquired Ute Mountain area. As part of the planning process routes within the area were inventoried. Approximately 16 miles were identified by the IMP for designation, while it called for all other existing routes to be closed. The current proposed action would give additional consideration to closing the existing routes, but would largely serve to implement the IMP.

### **4.2.1.2 Reasonably Foreseeable Actions**

The Taos Field Office is currently revising its land use plan. The Draft Taos Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, released for a 90-day public review and comment period on June 11, 2010, considers closing roughly 24, 000 acres of land, including San Antonio WSA and the Ute Mountain area, while continuing to limit the remaining Taos Plateau area to designated routes. Subsequent to the plan's completion, area-specific route designation plans will be prepared to determine which inventoried routes would be designated and which reclaimed. These determinations will be based on criteria presented in the plan that will take into account route redundancy, density, and excessive proliferation among other factors, while providing adequate access to the area.

## **4.2.2 Cumulative Effects**

### **4.2.2.1 Cultural Resources**

Potential cumulative impacts to cultural resources would be the same as those described in section 4.1.1.1.

### **4.2.2.2 Migratory Birds**

See section 4.2.2.8, Wildlife, below for a discussion of potential cumulative impacts to migratory birds.

### **4.2.2.3 San Antonio WSA**

Since management of San Antonio WSA under BLM's interim management policy for WSAs will remain in effect, no cumulative impacts should occur to its wilderness values.

#### ***4.2.2.4 Non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics***

No change is expected regarding the lands with wilderness characteristics in the Ute Mountain area under the revised Taos Resource Management Plan and subsequent travel management plans. Therefore, cumulative impacts are expected to the wilderness characteristics.

#### ***4.2.2.5 Geology and Soils***

The proposed action and alternative C would result in no cumulative degradation of soils or geology in the project area, and may offset reasonably foreseeable actions. The no action will result in cumulative degradation of geologic features and soils given reasonably foreseeable actions.

#### ***4.2.2.6 Vegetation including Noxious Weeds***

If the proposed action were to be implemented in conjunction with possible future actions under the 1994 North Unit Transportation Plan and the Taos Resource Management Plan the vegetation and noxious weeds in the project area would be diminished in the long-term due to the fact that one vector of seed dispersal (vehicles) would be eliminated or reduced by closing the roads. Possible slight increases in noxious weeds could occur during implantation phases, but long-term effects would not occur.

#### ***4.2.2.7 Water Quality***

Implementation of the proposed action or alternative C would help maintain water quality at its current level without degradation. The no action would cumulatively impair water quality when combined with other actions in these watersheds.

#### ***4.2.2.8 Wildlife***

While speculative at this point, if roads continue to proliferate in the area, there could be cumulative impacts to wildlife from increased light, noise, pollution, human disturbance or vegetation removal, and loss of individual animals from mortality caused by vehicular collision. The project sites are located in an area that is highly valued for existing wildlife populations. Some of the special status species that occupy this area are of high economic and cultural value and include elk, deer, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, raptors, prairie dogs, burrowing owls, mountain plover, and migratory birds. Over the years, increasing route proliferation has fragmented the habitat and could ultimately push wildlife species out of the area, causing increased competition for limited resources elsewhere.

#### ***4.2.2.9 Opportunities for Motorized Access in the Ute Mountain Area***

Potential future decisions regarding travel opportunities in the Ute Mountain area would be consistent with the management goals and objectives for the area. Since this action is also intended to meet those goals and objectives, as presented in the Ute Mountain IMP and the Draft Taos Resource Management Plan, cumulative impacts to opportunities for motorized access are not anticipated.

## **Chapter 5: Consultation and Coordination**

### **5.1 Summary of Public Participation and Other Consultation and Coordination**

The EA was made available for a 30-day public review and comment period beginning August 25, 2010 and ending September 26, 2010. The document was posted on-line at the Taos Field Office home page, and New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, grazing permittees, and other interested parties were notified of the availability of the document for review via notice in the mail.

#### **5.1.1 Public Comments Analysis**

*(To be completed following the end of the public review and comment period.)*

### **5.2 List of Preparers**

Tarah Burt – Park Ranger  
Greg Gustina – Biologist  
Tami Torres – Recreation Planner  
Brad Higdon – Planning and Environmental Coordinator  
Ricardo Leon – Park Ranger  
Patricio Martinez - GIS  
Paul Williams – Archaeologist  
Valerie Williams – Wildlife Biologist  
Jacob Young – Range Management Specialist

## **Chapter 6: References**

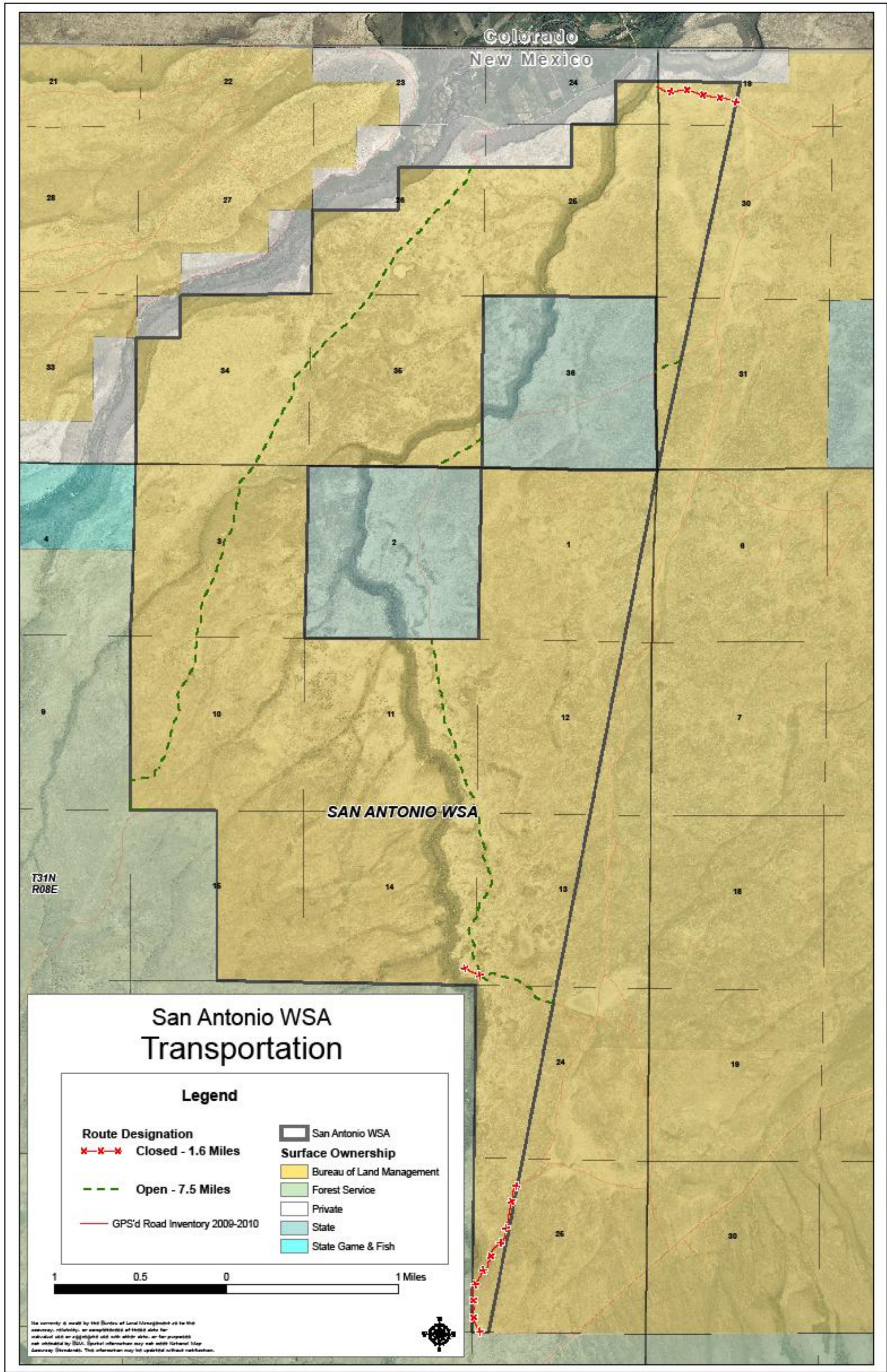
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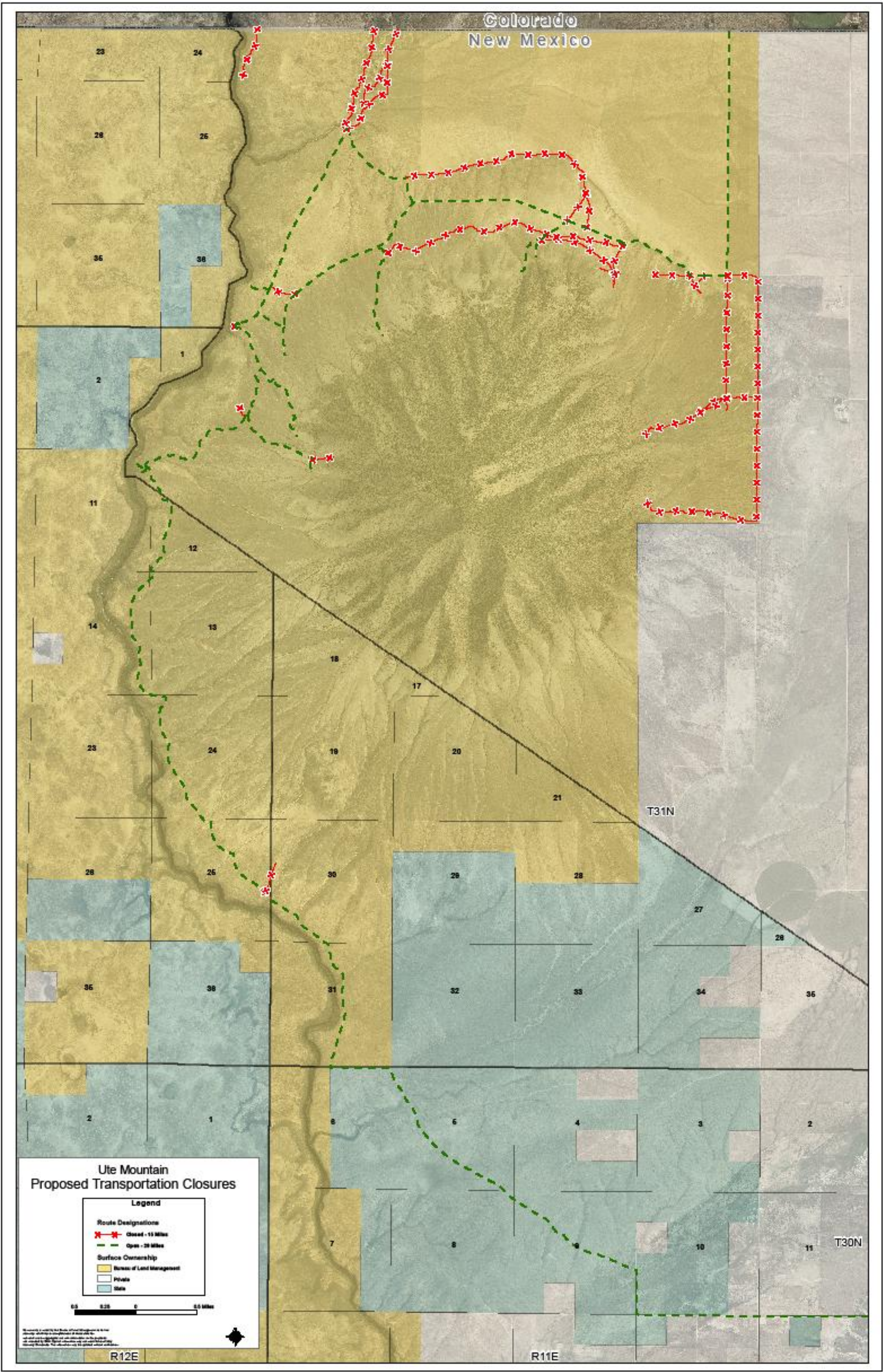


Appendix A: Map of San Antonio





Appendix B: Map of Ute Mountain





## Appendix C: Species of Concern

Source: New Mexico Ecological Services Field Office, Listed and Sensitive Species in Taos County (8/10/2010) @ <http://www.fws.gov>

Source: BLM New Mexico State Office

TAOS COUNTY		USFWS					BLM
Common Name	Scientific Name	E	T	P	C	SOC	Sensitive
<b>Mammals</b>							
bat, big-eared, Townsend's	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>					X	X
bat, myotis, brown, little, occult	<i>Myotis lucifugus occultus</i>						X
bat, myotis, fringed	<i>Myotis thysanodes thysanodes</i>						X
bat, myotis, long-eared	<i>Myotis evotis evotis</i>						X
bat, myotis, long-legged	<i>Myotis volans interior</i>						X
bat, myotis, small-footed	<i>Myotis ciliolabrum</i>						X
bat, myotis, Yuma	<i>Myotis yumanensis yumanensis</i>						X
ferret, black-footed	<i>Mustela nigripes</i>	X					X
mouse, jumping, meadow, NM	<i>Zapus hudsonius luteus</i>				X		X
otter, river, Southwestern	<i>Lutra canadensis sonorae</i>					X	
prairie dog, Gunnison's, montane	<i>Cynomys gunnisoni</i>				X		X
<b>Birds</b>							
cuckoo, yellow-billed	<i>Coccyzus americanus</i>				X		X
eagle, bald	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>						X
falcon, peregrine, American	<i>Falco peregrinus anatum</i>					X	X
falcon, peregrine, Arctic	<i>Falco peregrinus tundrius</i>					X	
flycatcher, willow, Southwestern	<i>Empidonax traillii eximius</i>	X					X
goshawk, northern	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>					X	X

TAOS COUNTY		USFWS					BLM
Common Name	Scientific Name	E	T	P	C	SOC	Sensitive
hawk, ferruginous	<i>Buteo regalis</i>						X
ibis, white-faced	<i>Pelgadis chihi</i>						X
owl, burrowing, western	<i>Athene cunicularia hypugea</i>					X	X
owl, spotted, Mexican	<i>Strix occidentalis lucida</i>		X				X
plover, mountain	<i>Charadrius montanus</i>			X			X
shrike, loggerhead	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>						X
sparrow, Baird's	<i>Ammodramus bairdii</i>					X	X
Fish							
chub, flathead	<i>Platygnathus gracilis</i>						X
sucker, Rio Grande	<i>Catostomus plebeius</i>					X	
trout, cutthroat, Rio Grande	<i>Oncorhynchus clarki virginalis</i>				X		X
Insects							
butterfly, silverspot, NM	<i>Speyeria nokomis nitocris</i>					X	
Molluscs							
peaclam, Sangre de Cristo	<i>Pisidium sanguinichristi</i>					X	X
snail, disc, striate, Cockerell's	<i>Discus shemeki cockerelli</i>					X	X
Plants							
Arizona Willow	<i>Salix arizonica</i>					X	
Ripley Milk Vetch	<i>Astragalus ripleyi</i>					X	X